

# Objective Classification in the Maricopa County Jail System

*by Mary Ellen Sheppard,  
Classification Administrator,  
Maricopa County Sheriff's  
Office, Phoenix, Arizona*

Every day thousands of inmates, ranging from dangerous, drug-addicted felons to unsophisticated, youthful offenders, enter the jails of America. They enter our doors into crowded, uncertain conditions. Each inmate, supported by laws, standards, and judicial decisions, requires us to stretch our limited resources further to provide for his/her safety and security.

The jails are being used as the dumping ground for many of society's special populations, including the elderly, the mentally ill, the mentally retarded, and the homeless. Jails also continue to fulfill their mandated role in the community by housing offenders awaiting trial and securing sentenced criminals, including the violent and predatory.

Objective classification involves much more than assigning custody levels.

In addition, jails have been affected by changes in law enforcement,

sentencing practices, and population growth, which have led to increased rates of incarceration. The result has been a mishmash of offenders in crowded jails poorly equipped to meet their custody and security needs. Risk management has become an increasingly complex task.

The Maricopa County Jail System has not been immune to these demands. But through the use of an objective classification process it has found a means to operate effectively. This was not always the case, though, and as Maricopa County discovered, objective classification involves much more than assigning custody levels. It is, instead, an ongoing process involving the entire jail system in making decisions that are guided by objective criteria and factual information. Like the system it drives, classification is continually changing.

## Historical Perspective

Prior to the late 1970s, the decision-making process used to determine the housing and management of inmates in the Maricopa County Jail

System was appropriately described as "by guess, by golly, and by guts." Housing decisions were based upon charge, bond amount, and officer recollection or immediate impression.

Reactive and subjective in nature, this system placed inmates and staff in vulnerable positions open to the consequences of serious violations of jail rules and regulations, including assault and escape. Housing decisions often led ultimately to predatory behaviors or suicide gestures, as custody needs went undetected.

When a lawsuit was filed against the Maricopa County Sheriff's Office for alleged constitutional violations, changes were finally necessary, and a formal classification system was developed. The Sheriff's Office adopted an eclectic system that was based upon similar systems in Contra Costa County, California, and the U.S. Bureau of Prisons.

Begun in 1981, this initial "objective" classification process employed civilian counselors to make security and housing decisions based on an additive point scale. The risk factors evaluated in the decision-making process included current charge, criminal history, age, employment, institutional behavior, and degree of substance abuse. Each factor included a range of points from which the counselor would choose, and the total points determined the security level.

This initial system was arguably an improvement over prior practice in its ability to assess security needs

and to manage diverse groups of inmates held in custody, but in the long term it didn't work. Among its problems was that counselors using the instrument came to different conclusions. In addition, jail staff were distrustful of the process, which they felt was forced upon them by outsiders; the line personnel responsible for the day-to-day management of inmates had limited input.

**As a result,** doors were closed to the new process and the people given the responsibility for it. Old methods for housing and moving inmates still prevailed despite the custody determinations made by classification personnel. These circumstances soon rendered classification decisions quite ineffective.

A successful lawsuit in the early 1980s relating to classification forced some changes. In this significant case, it was alleged that an inmate had been killed because he was housed with another inmate without regard for the latter's history of violence. The problem, said the court, was a lack of communication between key personnel, which allowed decisions to be made based upon partial facts.

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During this same period an inmate escaped and subsequently committed a new offense. This escape resulted

from the classification staff's assessment that the inmate's criminal history warranted only minor points, which led to a minimum security classification.

These critical incidents clearly identified the need to revise the classification process. In response, administrative personnel modified the classification scoring to achieve greater objectivity. The result was a more consistent classification process, which mandated weighing the factors used in decision-making. Unfortunately, this system led to costly overclassification-placing record numbers of inmates in maximum custody. The solution to the initial problem meant the creation of another.

### **Designing a Truly Objective System**

As these cases clearly demonstrated, our objective classification system was not meeting the complex needs represented by the inmate population and the jail. In investigating further, we realized that was because what we had wasn't objective at all.

In 1985 the Maricopa County Sheriffs Office went back to the drawing board.

With the assistance of consultants provided by the National Institute of Corrections, we revised the system for the third time.

But this time was different. This time the Maricopa County Jail System set out to ensure that the procedures established fit the guidelines of an objective classification process:

**The consistent analysis of inmate custody and housing needs has eliminated successful litigation relating to classification issues.**

- First, that the classification instrument provided for consistent decisions among staff and that these decisions would be carried out within the jail facilities.
- Second, that the system was one which could be supported fully by available resources.
- And finally, that the procedures resulted in fair and valid decisions that achieved the legitimate goals for which they were designed.

The first criterion was met by involving all components of the organization in the developmental stage. The administration deemed staff education essential. Policies and procedures were written to provide the support not otherwise generated by education and involvement.

Borrowing from the original additive point system and utilizing accepted risk factors, the staff developed a new format. The new format was then tested on 200 inmates to determine its impact on resources, e.g., How long did the process take?

What was the breakdown in custody levels? Who, in terms of inmate profiles, ended up where? Could we live with it? The results were communicated to key jail personnel. Modifications were made and bed space in the facility was allocated accordingly. All levels of the organization were involved.

And then, finally, the classification system was statistically validated in 1987. Factors that did not contribute to the overall assessment of risk were removed. Other factors were m-weighed. Policy and procedures were written to support the new procedures, which were found to score predators significantly higher than their potential victims.

Classification was then made a mandatory part of all officer training, in which the importance of continuing input from officers was emphasized. Finally, the sheriff's office established a committee that regularly assembled the different divisions to discuss inmate management issues and to review classification changes.

### **The System Today**

At present, more than 100 inmates are classified each day. They become part of an average inmate population of over 4,300 housed in facilities designated by the court to hold 2,000 fewer than that. Yet despite these conditions, the objective inmate classification system continues to work.

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nated successful litigation relating to classification issues. In addition, it has provided the foundation for many of the successful programs in effect in Maricopa County today. The evaluation, through an additive point system, of social ties, drug and alcohol use, current charge, criminal history, and institu-

tional behavior continues to provide reliable information upon which custody levels, housing, program needs, and eligibility are all determined.

Management options for housing inmates have increased. Because information is gathered and analyzed in a consistent manner, each custody level defines a general inmate profile. Knowledge of these profiles has allowed inmates who have historically been segregated because of a potential for victimization to be housed safely in the general population.

**T**he system has returned control of the jail to its administrators, as inmates are managed in accordance with their actual security needs. The classification system has formed the basis for budget decisions, staffing deployment, implementation of alternatives to incarceration, and planning and design of future jails.

The process continues. The system is monitored and revisions made as we increase our understanding of classification and the inmates we house. With each change we are confident that we are taking a positive step into

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the future through our total systems approach to objective jail classification and management.

For further information contact Mary Ellen Sheppard, Classification Administrator, Maricopa County Sheriff's Office, 225 W. Madison, Phoenix, Arizona, 85003; (602) 256-5389.

Assistance in implementing objective jail classification systems is also available from the National Institute of Corrections Jail Center, Jails Division; (303) 939-8866. ■